

[Neal Goswami, Bennington Banner](#)

Vermont's three-man congressional team is united in their desire to extend tax breaks to the middle-class while letting existing tax breaks for the wealthy expire later this year.

In separate telephone interviews Thursday, Sens. Patrick Leahy and Bernie Sanders and Rep. Peter Welch said they support President Barack Obama's plan to extend tax cuts enacted by former President George W. Bush for individuals earning less than \$200,000 or couples earning less than \$250,000.

"I favor extending the tax cuts for hard-working Vermonters and letting them expire for wealthy millionaires," Welch, a Democrat, said Thursday.

But Republicans, and some moderate Democrats, want to extend all of the tax breaks now on the books. The total cost of extending the tax breaks is near \$4 trillion over the next decade. Eliminating the breaks for the country's wealthiest would chop \$700 billion from the cost, Welch argued.

He said he would not look to compromise by extending tax breaks to the wealthy for one or two more years, rather than indefinitely.

"It's a very irresponsible policy that the Washington Republicans are pushing," Welch said. "Why would I want to put the cost of these tax breaks to these millionaires on the backs of our kids. We're either serious about dealing with the deficit or not."

"If they refuse to act they will be responsible for a tax increase on the hard-working folks in Bennington," Welch added.

Leahy, a Democrat, and Sanders, an independent, are on the same page.

Leahy said he opposed the tax breaks when the Bush administration proposed them during war time, without a plan to pay for either. The result has been skyrocketing national debt, he said.

"You can't go to war and have a tax break and borrow all the money for the war from China. It turned out I was right. It was the first time we'd ever gone to war and cut taxes," Leahy said.

He said Obama's plan to eliminate breaks for wealthy Americans while extending them for the middle-class is in line with policies during the Clinton administration that resulted in a budget surplus. "I think (Obama is) right on that and for the Republicans to hold that hostage to give a tax break to millionaires, it makes no sense," Leahy said.

Sanders said he doesn't plan to compromise on "returning to tax rates that were in effect in the Clinton years."

"In my view, it is a very dumb idea -- a very dumb idea -- to continue the tax breaks that went to the top 2 percent," he said. "It makes no sense to me that over a 10-year period we would give them \$700 billion in tax breaks."

Sanders said he would like Congress to use half the savings -- \$350 billion -- for deficit reduction, and invest the remaining \$350 billion in the country's "crumbling infrastructure."

The current make up of the Senate could require compromise, however. Democrats control 59 votes in the upper chamber, shy of the 60 votes needed to break a filibuster. Some moderate Republicans have indicated a temporary extension of breaks for the wealthy will secure their vote.

Whether or not Congress will act before the mid-term election in November is in question, too. Taking no action means the breaks will expire for everyone.

Welch said he is pushing for action. He said voters should know before they go to the polls where their members of Congress stand.

"This is an important issue for voters and I think they're entitled to know where we are," he said. "I've been very explicit with my colleagues on what I think we have to do. We have to make a decision. This is quite consequential."

Both Leahy and Sanders said they believe public sentiment is on their side.

"Let's see how the public responds," Leahy said. "If the Republicans block that, those tax cuts that the average American gets will go away."

Republicans will back down if Democrats "stand tall," Sanders said.

"At the end of the day ... I don't think they're going to be party to letting the tax breaks for the middle class expire for their wealthy friends," Sanders said. "There's not unanimity, but if I were a betting man, I'd bet this is done before we leave."